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The responsibility of misled people

Franca D'Agostini
Università degli Studi di Milano
franca.dagostini@unimi.it

Abstract A basic argument for preferring misleading (deceiving someone by telling the truth) to successful lying (deceiving by believed false assertion) is that misled people are relatively *free* to select the true content of what is said. So if they do not, they are at least partially responsible for deceit. The article focuses on possible unfair implications of the idea, and presents the principles that may guide a correct assessment of victims' responsibility in deceptions by language.

Keywords: Lying and Misleading, Doxastic responsibility, Victim-blaming

Invited Paper.

1. Introduction

Victim blaming (VB) is the argumentative strategy whereby the victim of a crime or some injustice is held to be the responsible, or the main responsible, for what she is victim[1]. VB arguments are often classified as fallacies, but they are a special, and specifically resistant, kind of fallacy. First, they are generally grounded on a *frame* (or a common ground[2]) that justifies the semi-paradoxical defense of 'strong people': a well recognizable line of thought whose tradition goes from Callicles to Nietzsche onward, and is sometimes endorsed by right-wing sympathizers. So to reveal the full import of the fallacy one has to confront with this complex view. Second, what is especially problematic in this kind of arguments is that there might be some truth in them. My wallet gets stolen, and you say «you should have been more careful»; maybe you are right, at least partially right. Arguably, it is this partial truth that makes VB arguments recurrent, and either subliminally or openly accepted, on occasion, by reasonable people. More generally, victim's responsibility is an important judicial factor, whose impact may

[1] The theme is a specific concern of «victimology», and as such it has been treated by Ryan (1971), and later variously developed (Viano 1990). Govier (2015) gives an account in the perspective of the argumentation theory, distinguishing four attitudes towards victims: silence, deference, reproach and blame. VB especially regards the last two, but some sort of dominant VB is implicit in the entire range of possible attitudes towards victims. See also Tietjens Meyers (2016) whose approach is grounded on victim's testimony, but the main focus is on the relationships between victims and their defenders. Some attention to the role of truth is given by Becker (2016). VB is also a crucial concern of feminist philosophy, especially with reference to rape (see Whisnant 2017: 19).

[2] Classically, Stalnaker (2002) locates presuppositions in a «common ground» between speakers; a similar idea for political argumentation is the notion of «frame» suggested by Lakoff (2004).

modify moral and legal judgements. The first concern in analyzing VB is thus to explore the veridical aspects of the reproaches to victims: how can we do justice to this partial truth without doubling the offense, combining victim's damage with the impossibility of compensation?

In this paper, I try to capture VB arguments in what is probably their clearest and apparently justified application: the case of deceptive communications, when a speaker makes someone believe some falsity. In these cases, victims' responsibility is quite evident, at least if one assumes – following Kant (1785, engl. ed.: 347) – that people are *free* to believe what they want to believe[3]. More specifically, the aim of the article is to suggest some guidelines for assessing the *doxastic responsibility* of speakers and hearers in successfully deceiving assertions. I especially consider the case in which a person is *misled* by someone who tells some truth conveying false conversational implicature[4]. You say that *p*, which is true, and I am led by your utterance to believe some false proposition *q*; in case you intended to deceive me, I would be partially responsible for deceit. But 'how much' responsible am I? How relevant is my contribution to the deceptive process? The question is especially interesting because misleading generally seems preferable to lying: if you are in the need of deceiving someone, telling a deceiving truth is considered morally better than telling a lie. And one of the classic arguments for this moral asymmetry is that the deceived person is *free* to believe the right implication of what is said. Here the risk of VB arises: the idea of preferring misleading to successful lying encourages reproaching victims and discharging deceivers (§ 2.5). The risk mainly affects the third person who evaluates the deceit, and tries to state the relative responsibility of speakers and hearers: how can she avoid the risk of fallacious VB in case of M?

In section 2, I focus on three basic reasons why misleading may be held preferable to lying, with special attention to the role of victims' cooperation. In section 3, I present the theoretical premises of what I call a 'responsibility calculus', exploring the various doxastic constraints that assertions exert on the audience. In the last section, I suggest some preliminaries for a fair assessment of victims' contribution in case of misleading assertions. The result of the analysis is that, when it comes to verbal deception, the partial truth in VB arguments turns out to be simple falsity: the contribution of victims is irrelevant.

2. Is misleading better than lying?

Lying (L) and misleading (M) are intended here as two basic ways of deceiving by making an assertion: L by believed falsity, M by believed truth. More specifically:

> L $=_{df}$ 'p' is a lie iff (i) a speaker S asserts that p; (ii) S does not believe that p; (iii) S intends to deceive someone by saying that p[5].

[3] In the current conditions of public debate the problem has assumed a special relevance. In democracy, electors who vote a candidate believing his false or misleading assertions (because they are not well informed or ground their judgement on inaccurate evaluations) can be considered responsible for the political consequences of their choice. Similar considerations have inspired some recent proposals to substitute democracy with «epistocracy», in which citizens have the right to vote only if they have attended a course and passed an exam (Brennan 2017)

[4] The analogy between VB in case of rape and misleading is also suggested by Jennifer Saul (2012a: 84): I will come back to this later on (§ 2.4).

[5] NB: '*p*' is the truthbearer, *p* is the truthmaker.

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M =$_{df}$ 'p' is a misleading assertion iff (i) S asserts that p; (ii) S believes that p; (iii) S intends to deceive someone by saying that p.

2.1. Asserting and making believe

The current definitions of L and M are different from these and usually more complex[6]. In case of L, the third clause is frequently omitted, as there might be 'lies' without the intention to deceive. In fact, we are interested here in liars as *deceivers*, so we can accept the more traditional view of liars as deceivers by asserting some believed falsity[7]. Besides that, 'M' is a success term, so in usual definitions there is no reference to speaker's intention, and M is generally contrasted with «successful» L, as liars may fail in their deceptive aim (say, because what is believed false is true). Our concern here is the *intentional* deceiver, so the two definitions are in order, and the difference is only in the clause (ii): misleaders believe that what they are saying is true; liars do not.

In both cases it is assumed that M and L are *assertive* speech acts, which is not always given in other definitions[8]. It is assumed that one may lie by other speech acts, say by promising to do what one intend to do (Marsili, 2016); and one may mislead (or «lying by falsely implicating») in a variety of ways (Meibauer 2005, 2011, 2014). I think that for the needs of the present analysis the definitional choice I am proposing is preferable. What we are interested in is the respective responsibility of speakers and hearers, in making believe and in believing falsity, so we must presuppose a *public* attempt to transmit beliefs, via an open use of language, which can be judged by observers. And the notion of assertion seems to satisfy these needs. More specifically, I favour a belief-oriented account of assertion, whereby

Ass1 =$_{df}$ 'p' is an assertion iff (i) 'p' is a truthbearer, (ii) a speaker S says that p, and (iii) by saying 'p' S wants to make some audience believe something[9].

In virtue of (i) an assertion involves alethic language, i.e. language susceptible of truth-ascription: '*p*' is a truthbearer, so a piece of language that might be considered true or false or untrue, and believed true, or false or untrue by S and by the audience[10]. In virtue

[6] Mahon, 2016. Saul (2012a: ch. 1) gives a detailed and exhaustive discussion of different proposed definitions.

[7] A version of the proposed definition is given by Augustine's De Mendacio (*Liber unus*, 3.3); a similar account is also endorsed by Williams (2002: 96) «an assertion, the content of which the speaker believes to be false, which is made with the intention to deceive the hearer». Lackey (2013) argues in favour of the traditional definition. One may claim that deceptive lies are a subset of lies (Fallis, 2015), so are not definitionally relevant. This may imply that the traditional (deceit-oriented) definition is simply wrong, as the condition (iii) is not necessary. I am not sure that one should accept a similar solution. I tend to believe that a 'lie', properly called, is an attempt to deceive by assertive language, while lies that do not satisfy the definition are rather to be called 'fibs', or with some other popular name. In Italian and in other languages the distinction is clearer than in English: a *menzogna* is intentionally deceiving, a *bugia* might be non-deceiving.

[8] Saul (2012a) avoids both the intention to deceive, and the reference to 'assertion' rather introducing the idea of liars as «warranting the truth» of what they say.

[9] One may postulate other definitions and characterizations (see Brown and Cappelen 2011, first part, in particular MacFarlane 2011; about the problems and controversies in defining 'assertion' see Pagin 2016). But I think other definitions are hardly adaptable to the problem I am dealing with.

[10] This is in the line of the theory whereby an assertion is a constative act, so has a «word-world direction of fit». See Marsili (2018) for recent discussions about the alethic import of assertives in the perspective of truth as rule or aim of the speech act.

of (iii) an assertive act is an attempted conveyance of beliefs by use of language[11], but S intends to make people believe «something», so what S intends to convey by saying that *p* might be different from '*p*' (the asserted content). S wants someone to believe something, and might try to obtain this by a variety of (linguistic) means: by literality, implication, impliciture, implicature, allusion, possible completions, etc. So both liars and intentional misleaders are asserters as they intend to make people believe '*p*' and/or other propositions related to '*p*'; but misleaders intend to make people believe some other propositions more or less directly related to 'p': the focus of their deceit is not '*p*'. However, the act is performed by saying that *p*. Thus, if we move to the *public* character of assertions, we ought to concede that:

> Ass2: if S asserts that *p*, then S is *ritually* assumed to believe that *p*[12].

This does not mean that L-deceiving assertions are fake-assertions, so are not assertions, eventually[13]. Simply, S «represents herself», in case of L, as believing what in fact she does not believe[14]; while in case of M, S says that *p* and she believes what she says: what she 'represents' is true[15].
Ass2 specifies a *ritual* or purely *formal* feature of assertives[16]. Speakers may lie, or the audience may have doubts about they really believe what they say. But assertive contexts are situations or states in which speakers are to be formally considered in this way. In this sense, in virtue of Ass1 we can assume that any assertion that *p* formally *conveys* a conjunction of *de re* and *de se* contents: "p' & I believe that p'[17]. This perspective is especially useful, as I will show, for clarifying the distinction between M and L, and the elements that a believer (or a third person) has in evaluating deceiving assertions.

2.2 Is M preferable?

There might be three reasons why M ought to be considered morally better than L:

> (a) *absence of believed falsity*: the speaker does not violate the maxim of truthfulness (say what you believe is true), which is the basic rule of any informational interaction;

[11] There could be a variety of characterizations of 'making believe'. For instance, applying Stalnaker's account (2002), it can be interpreted as a proposal to add the asserted proposition to the «common ground», the set of presuppositions that speakers and hearers share in the context. But there is no need to specify for now. Later I will give some more details: suggesting that S's intention of belief-making can be pictured as the intention to convey a propositional content: a Fregean «thought» (§ 3).

[12] Ass2 could be seen as a specification of (ii) in Ass1.

[13] Pagin (2011) notes: «an assertion is not disqualified as an assertion because the speaker lies or because the hearer believes she is lying. A reasonable account of assertion must be robust with respect to these alternatives» (Pagin, 2011: 124). I think Ass1 (with Ass2) is robust enough, in this respect.

[14] Such an aspect has been specifically stressed by Black (1952), and later variously proposed (Pagin, 2016: 28-29). I will discuss possible counter-examples later (§ 2.2).

[15] I thus postulate sincerity as *de se* truth, in a way that is fairly similar to Marsili (2016).

[16] In Green's account S's intended belief is «an expressive convention» of the assertion that p, whereby the speaker «can be represented as bearing the belief-relation to p» (Green, 2007: 160). See below § 2.2 for the discussion of exceptions and problems. Note for now that being formally represented as believing that *p* is different from 'manifesting' or 'expressing' the belief that *p*.

[17] See Lewis (1979) for *de se* truths. Lewis believed they are not propositional; I concede that when conveyed by an assertive act, an attitude becomes a Fregean thought, i.e. a proposition de se.

(b) *freedom of inference*: the speaker leaves the hearer free to decide which one, among the beliefs conveyed by the utterance, is the true one.

(c) *social damage*: M is preferable, because when the misleader is caught misleading, the discovery does not completely destroy the deceiver's reliability.

Our major concern here is (b), but something should be said of the other two, because, as I will now explain, (b) seems to be the main criterion.

2.3 Deceiving assertions and social damage

A version of (c) has been suggested by Webber (2013), following Strudler (2010). In Webber's definition, M differs from L because

> «The liar deceives by false assertion, the misleader by false conversational implicature», where 'implicature' is «meaning conveyed that is neither asserted nor logically entailed by what is asserted» (Webber 2013: 653).

If I misled you, and you discover this, I suffer a *credibility deficit*[18], and this will regard my credibility *in implicatures*: from now on, you will not be so confident that I will avoid implying false propositions; but you will not think that in other occurrences I would say some falsity, so I do not suffer any credibility deficit *in assertions*. Webber (2013) stresses that there is «asymmetry»: credibility deficit in implicatures does not imply any credibility deficit in assertions, while the converse holds. The damage occurring in L is so greater, because the caught liar suffers a double credibility deficit: in assertions and in implicatures. Asymmetry also explains the reason why if a person asks specification for a misleading utterance does not provoke the «collapse of truth» engendered by questioning someone's assertion. And this is why, according to Webber, L is more damaging «for society».

The credibility deficit suffered by the deceiver is an interesting aspect of the analysis of deceptive processes, but Webber's criterion can be overturned. In fact, one could note that the misleader displaces the deceit from what she explicitly says to what she implies; in so doing, she withdraws evident, checkable, elements of proof, and makes the detection of her crime harder. So M-strategy modifies the same conditions of the deceiver's credibility, as it reduces the possibility of discovering deceit. In this sense, that M can save the consummate deceiver from having her credibility in assertions destroyed could be seen a social damage, in itself: because (if Webber's principle works) the M-deceiver would be able to enjoy her credibility qua assertor to keep engaging in deceptive behaviour. Consider the paradigm example of despicable M which is Iago's language in Shakespeare's *Othello*[19]. Iago does not always say lies, strictly speaking. Most of his deception is by misleading: he asserts a series of partial truths and allusive conjectures; in virtue of his M-statements Othello is led to believe falsity, and in virtue of false premises he ends up killing his own wife. What makes of Iago an archetypical malign deceiver is the fact that his deception is «sneaky», subtle, and not easily captured.

[18] The notion has been launched in social epistemology by Fricker (2007), and later developed by many authors (see especially Anderson 2012).

[19] See O'Brien (2007), for a different account of Iago's case.

2.4. Truth?

As to (a), it says that *ceteris paribus* we do not like L because it involves falsity, while M does not. The basic idea is that *truthfulness* is a fundamental principle of human cooperation[20]; any violation directly undermines the bases of associated life. In this respect, (a) seems to be the most fundamental criterion. And yet, it is possibly the weakest of the three criteria. Because there are good reasons to challenge the idea that there is no believed falsity in M.

Consider the case suggested by Saul (2012a and 2012b). Frieda suffers from a serious peanut allergy, and George knows it. He invites her to dinner, and offers her a fry prepared with peanut oil. Frieda asks 'are there peanuts in the meal?' and George denies. Frieda eats the fry, and dies. This is another extreme case: face to the serious harm produced, the fact that George did not utter any false statement seems irrelevant. But are we sure that George did not violate the maxim of truthfulness? Was George's assertion really *truthful?*

In virtue of Ass2, an assertion that *p* formally conveys the self-ascription: 'I believe that *p*'[21]. This provides a clear and simple distinction between L and M. In L-deceptions speakers do not believe what they assert, so in asserting that *p* they convey '*p* and I believe that *p*'[22], and both conjuncts are false for them. One may say that liars lie twice: *de re* (about what they believe are the truthmakers of what they say) and *de se* (about their beliefs). By contrast, in M-deceits the speaker says that *p* and believes that *p*, both conjuncts are true for her, so apparently the *de re* and the *de se* contents of the assertion are said truthfully. Accordingly, George is meant to convey: 'there are no peanuts in the meal and I believe that there are no peanuts', and both conjuncts are believed true by him. But *this is only part of the story.*

In informative interactions (especially when the asserted content is presented as the answer to a question), the speaker who asserts '*p*' is implicitly conveying another *de se* proposition:

I want to cooperate in saying that *p*

or also:

[20] Besides the seminal approach of Grice's maxims (see Grice 1975), other classical sources potentiates the social role of alethic behaviours. Lewis (1968) shows that the requirement of truthfulness is constitutive for the same creation of linguistic convention; the same holds for Williams (2002), though in a totally different («non-descriptivist») perspective.

[21] As mentioned, the belief-oriented account has been criticized, in various ways. Pagin (2016: 28-29) notes that in asserting that p one «does not also *claim* that she believes that p» (emphasis mine), which is true, but what I am referring here is not what the speaker *claims* but what he *conveys* (more about this in section 3). The B-conveyance is ritual, as stated, the speaker «represents herself» as a believer, independently from her actually being so, and hearers take her to representing this, even if they do not believe she believes. Pagin also contends (2016: 29) that an actor on stage may assert 'I am in the biology department' without believing and without being believed to believe, so 'representing' must be intended in more robust sense. I would object first that the actor is represented as believing this *in the fiction*, as the 'asserter' in that case is not the actor, but the fictional character: and the public believes he believes it, in the fiction. Second, there is no effective difference between real and fictional assertives, as any speech act as a social action is a representational act, eventually. Another benefit of the B-account of assertion, intended in this way, is that it offers a way to incorporate the alethic accounts: because if S believes (or is intended to believe) that p, then she believes that 'p' is true (this is the case); which allows to dodge the complex question of truth as *aim* or *rule* of assertives (see Marsili 2018).

[22] About the idea of the conveyances of what is said, see § 3.

I want to give you the information you need'[23].

These clauses are not *said* or *claimed* by the speaker (see § 3.2), but are necessarily involved in the conversational setting, as they express the principle of cooperation ruling any (supposedly) informative exchange. Now we can see the exact location of falsity in M speech acts: it is neither located in what is said (the locutionary act 'p'), nor in what is ritually implied by the assertion as such (p & I believe that p), but in a third clause that is formally postulated by the context: 'I want to cooperate'. So George's assertion should be intended in this way: [24]

There are no peanuts in the meal & I believe that there are no peanuts & I want to give you the information you need

The first two conjuncts are true, the third is false, and believed false by George[25]. Ultimately, we can say that M is lying *de se*: the speaker misrepresents herself. Is lying about oneself better than lying about things? If we concede that the liar may fail in her program of transmitting falsity, because what she says is in fact true, we would say that what counts is always and only de se falsity, which is the vehicle of the intention to deceive: how people perform would be totally irrelevant.

2.5. Misleading and victim blaming

If we accept all this, we might be tempted to conclude that the effective distinction between M and L is only given by contexts. In fact, there is still a difference, and I think it is entirely due to (b): the idea that in M-communications people can select the true conveyance of what is said. This freedom of interpretation seems a fundamental principle for preferring M over L, more fundamental than (a) and (c).

First, we can see that (a) is grounded on (b). In communicative interactions in which truth is concerned (especially informative transmittance of beliefs, or testimony), what counts is not truth as such (the honest asserter might say what is false but believed true), but the audience's *possibility* of acquiring knowledge (so selecting the true conveyance) upon hearing the assertion. If the victim of M-deceit can really choose among different interpretations, one of which is simply true, then she is still in the condition of knowing the truth. We see thus that M is better than L not simply because the speaker tells (or rather seems to tell) the believed truth, but because the victim of M-deceit is supposedly free to reject the false conveyance, and to accept the true one; the range of epistemic opportunities is at disposal, open in front of her.

[23] In some accounts, any assertive is somehow informative, so «an utterance u is an assertion iff u is prima facie informative» (Pagin 2011: 102). I do not think I have to endorse this view, as one can speak of 'assertion' also in case of discussion (not informing but presenting opinions), or consolation (not informing but helping someone), etc. But one may say that intentional deceits usually occur in information-oriented speech acts.

[24] I will show that the 'conveyances' of an assertion are specifically important for the evaluation of doxastic responsibility. I will clarify the notion (§ 3), for now consider that by 'conveyances' I mean all the possible contents (Fregean thoughts) released by an assertion in context. Which means that some conveyances are intentional, others are not, some are formal, others are informal, but they all intervene (and may be taken into account) in the evaluation of deceit. The commitment to cooperation is to be formally postulated, which does not mean it must be respected (by speakers) and/or taken as respected (by hearers).

[25] I admit that de se ascriptions ('I want to do this', or 'I believe that p') are true or false: this is a relevant point (conceded by Lewis 1979), but cannot be treated here.

Second, the appeal to (b) may also justify (c). The asymmetry between credibility in assertions and in implicatures stressed by Webber is basically due to the fact that when I ask for more specification of an utterance '*p*', by asking, say: 'do you mean that *q*?' where '*q*' is one possible implicature of '*p*', I want to mean that the misunderstanding might be due to my incomprehension, or to the ambiguity, vagueness or incompleteness of language. So I implicitly admit that the speaker might not be the real 'culprit' of my possible mistake.
Here is thus the strongest reason why M is better than L, I suppose: that *M leaves open the game of communication*, giving the hearer the possibility of selecting the true content and of asking for more specification without expressing epistemic mistrust.
All that stated, it is important to acknowledge that the criterion (b) is extremely arguable, when intended in its *degenerated version*, that from victims' relative freedom infers victims' responsibility, so paving the way to VB. Calculated misleading appears definitely unfair and reproachable, just because it tends to promote some VB attitude. In Iago's case, the culprit of the tragedy is, unquestionably, Othello, but this displacement of responsibility ought to work as an *aggravating* factor, in judging Iago's strategy. Iago's lying *de se* relies on a threefold calculus: one aimed at producing Othello's defeat (direct effect: the crime), another one aimed at warrant Othello's confidence (which potentiates the deceit, as he conveys the false self-ascription 'I am loyal and reliable'); and a third one, aimed at saving himself from punishment, burdening Othello with the entire responsibility of the tragedy. What about the elegant liberality and openness of M, in virtue of (b)? Iago's case is extreme, but it makes us see that what we do not like in M is basically the *diversion of responsibility* onto the victim.
As Saul (2012a: 84) claims, «the partial causal responsibility of a victim does not in any way affects the wrongness of what is done to them». But how can we justify this claim? She writes:

> I do not know why it is that natural to suppose that – *in some cases* – a victim's causal partial responsibility for their fate means that what has been done to them is less wrong. But this apparently natural view seems to me to be one that we should firmly reject. Once we reject this view, we have no reason to suppose that different levels of responsibility for inferences in case of lying and misleading might render misleading more preferable to lying (*ibidem*).

I have suggested (§ 1) that this «naturalness» is to be related first to a «common ground» of resistant presuppositions that are socially and politically relevant; and second, that it relies on certain pieces of evidence that make the idea of victim's responsibility in some sense *true*. Ultimately, Frieda *should* have been more careful, and seek for more information. And Othello *was* irrationally jealous. This partial truth is the specific concern of this paper. I take Saul's claim as an invitation to «reframing», i.e. «changing the way in which the public [philosophers as well as non-philosophers] see the world» (Lakoff 2004: xv). An accurate revision of the plausibility of (b) can be seen as a part of the reframing enterprise. We ought to explain why we are right in thinking that similar arguments are wrong, despite their being grounded on partially true premises.

3. What is said and what is conveyed by saying

When we evaluate assertions in moral or juridical perspective, we do not only focus on what is said but on what is conveyed by saying (WIC). There is a variety of accounts and diagnoses about said and unsaid contents. Saul's theory of the difference between L and M is based on an accurate consideration of all the different positions (2012a: 21-68).

The idea of 'conveyance' I am proposing is not rival to other accounts, rather, it is intended to embrace the variety of 'unsaid' but contextually active contents of an assertion that are relevant for judging the doxastic responsibility of speakers and hearers.
I will assume thus that WIC is not reducible to the semantic content of the uttered sentence, or to what the speaker wants to convey either, or to what the hearer in the context given may infer, but variously involves all this. We can see WIC as the global amount of all doxastic effects of language (including semantic as well as pragmatic and contextual features[26]). More specifically, it can be conceived as an *indeterminate range of propositions* (see Saul 2012a: 21-68), some of which are the intended focus of the deceit (if the speaker has deceptive programs), while others are due to the audience's background information, or to other contextual factors, or to a combination of all this.[27]

3.1. What believers believe

The propositional account is implicit in our moral analyses of language. Consider this version of *the paradox of blackmail* (Clark 1994):

I - Frieda tells George

(1) 'I know that you killed your wife'

then after a while she adds

(2) 'I need money'.

Is this blackmail? *Per se*, Frieda has not said anything really reproachable. You don't do anything wrong in informing someone that you are acquainted with her crime; and there's nothing bad in saying that you need money. Yet, the two assertions typically convey:

(3) If you do not give me money, I will report you.

If George accepted the blackmail, then he would behave as if Frieda had 'said' something like that. We evaluate Frieda's speech act, and George's possible reactions, considering the unspoken proposition (3), inferred by George, not from (1) and (2), but from the contextually close occurring of (1) and (2). And (3) has no semantic connection with (1) and (2), but is given by Frieda's saying (2) shortly after (1).
We are able to grasp Frieda's move as blackmail, and not as an innocent transmission of information, only by considering (3). There is no moral (and legal) judgement of the

[26] In this sense, belief-conveyances are the objective products of the utterance in itself, so are quite similar to Fregean thoughts, in Michael Dummett's characterization: «the thought expressed [in the «event» of the utterance] is thus a feature of the utterance: accruing it in consequence of a variety of facts: the sentence of which the utterance is a token; the content of the utterance; and the language considered as a conventional practice» (Dummett 1991: 261).

[27] The main advantage of such an account is that it preserves the resources of a semantic (truth-oriented) analysis, though saving sensitivity to the variety of contexts and their pragmatic aspects. Saul's proposal (see 2012a), in this respect, is not far from mine. It is based on an «Indeterminate Completion view» of what is said, able to capture what we mean when we say that a person 'has lied' in cases in which she has 'said' some definitely deceiving true sentence. To the effect that one may call 'L' also cases in which all acceptable completions of an uttered sentence (that are needed to assess its truth) are false. For other proposals of combined semantic + pragmatic approaches, see Penco - Domaneschi 2013: part 1.

case without the involvement of (3) or some similar proposition. George's inference of (3) from (1) and (2) can be later discussed by Frieda, by saying: 'I did not mean to blackmail you'. And our moral evaluation depends on the importance we ascribe to (3): was (3) really implied in what was said? Maybe Frieda did not really want to blackmail George, and if George gives her money, hoping she will not report him, we may say that he has been misled by his own misinterpretation.
It is thus reasonable to assume that any asserted '*p*' conveys an indeterminate variety of (true or false or untrue) propositions – more or less related to the semantic content of '*p*', and that can be more or less rationally inferred from '*p*'. The speaker's intention may be that the hearer believes one or more of them, though all this is attempted (or achieved) by saying only that *p*[28]. When we judge the moral import of the assertion, we consider all this.

3.2. The relevant conveyances

The propositional account is useful for stating a distinction between M and L that could be sensitive to cases in which in fact there is no substantial difference. A criterion proposed by Saul is that if all the «reasonable completions» of a statement are false, then there is no difference between M and L, and we can peacefully speak of L. For instance (see Saul 2012a: 63):

> II - I want to deceive Iggy, and I tell him
>
> (4) Helga is not ready

which may be true, because, say: Helga is not ready to believe that God exists, or to take part in the world athletic championship. But she *is* ready, actually: ready to see Iggy, or ready for the party, and I want to deceive Iggy about this.
The salient completions of what is said might be:

> (4') Helga is not ready for the party
>
> or:
>
> (4'') Helga is not ready to see Iggy

They are definitely more reasonable, in the given context, than any other completion, and are both false.
This is a very simple case, my assertion (4) cannot be understood without integration, and the range of plausible integrations is clearly given by the context. Other cases are more insidious.

> III - Jones wants to get a loan from Brown, who is a bank manager: he meets Brown at a party, and he says to him and to other people
>
> (5) 'I bought a Ferrari'

which is true, because Jones used all his money to buy an old second-hand Ferrari.

[28] Such perspective does not diminish the role of speakers' statements in informational exchanges. What Lackey (2008) has called the *Statement View of Testimony* (statements and not the speaker's beliefs are causally related to what is believed) can be accepted, in its basic postulate.

What Jones wanted Brown to believe is that he was rich. The deceiving content is instantiated by the false unspoken conveyance:

(6) Jones is rich

Which Brown may infer from (5) in virtue of the counterfactual principle:

(7) If a person were not well off, she would not be able to buy a Ferrari.

We can understand Jones' strategy, because we take (6) into consideration, and we know that (6) is related to (5) in virtue of (7), so (6) is for us a part of the situation and it plays an important role in our judgement. But we cannot say that Jones has *asserted* or *claimed* (6). The «thought» he wants to convey is this, but the relation between what he says and what he wants to convey is not clearly detectable on the basis of his saying. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the audience is indeterminate. Jones wants to mislead Brown but he does not speak *to* Brown. In this sense, Jones' act cannot even be judged 'misleading' in itself. And yet we know that Jones has the intention to deceive Brown.
How do we select the deceit-relevant conveyances, provided that they may have no relation to the asserted content? As Saul (2012a: 65) claims, to explore the whole range of completions (and more generally all the rationally inferable contents of an uttered '*p*') might be «a formidable task». But I think that in the perspective I am proposing there are resources for providing a first exploration.

3.3. Varieties of doxastic constraint

The first step of the strategy here advanced is thus to focus on WIC, i.e. what the act of asserting *p* (more or less intentionally) conveys in a context, for a hearer. The second step is to express the conveyed contents by propositions, that is, items that can be judged true, false, untrue. Now the hypothesis is that we can establish (if not 'calculate') the degree of doxastic responsibility of speakers and their audience by focusing on the inferential force of (intentionally) deceptive conveyances. The basic idea is that the various contents conveyed in human communications exert distinctive *constraints* on beliefs, and we are in the condition of evaluating these differences.
Consider two classical examples of M that are quite similar, because they both involve the same given: the classical *freedom of inference from negation*. The first is of Josiah Royce, and has been variously mentioned by other authors (see Posner 1980, Meibauer 2005: 1380).

> IV – The captain of a ship is worried because the second officer is always drunk, so he writes every day in the logbook the true sentence 'today the second officer is drunk'; the second officer reads the logbook, and writes, only one time: 'today the captain is not drunk'.

The other example is St. Athanasius' story, reported by Cardinal Newman (see Williams 2002, Strudler 2010):

> V – Questioned by his persecutors who did not know him and ask 'where is Athanasius?' the holy man misled them by saying: 'he is not far from here'.

The sentences are true, but uttered with a «sneaky» intent, as both the second officer and Athanasius want to convey a false proposition: that today the captain is not drunk

but every other day is; that Athanasius is not far from here but he is not here. But a reader who is not endowed with specific hermeneutical suspect may simply select that the captain is not drunk; and Athanasius' persecutors may well suspect that their prey is in fact the speaker (or very close to him).
If we compare the two cases, it is reasonable to say that Athanasius' responsibility for deceit is greater than the second officer's. Actually,

(8) Athanasius is not far from here

is intended to convey:

(8') Athanasius is not here

Which is false (and believed false by the speaker), and:

(8") Athanasius is here

Which is true. But (8") is less rationally connected to (8) than (8'), first because (8) violates the first person rule, and second because 'not far from here' is clearly redundant for 'here'. So we assume that the doxastic constraint of (8') is greater than the one conveyed by (8"). The persuasive force of the deceit is due to this spread between the two plausible conveyances, because, simply: the false conveyance is more compelling than the true one.
Instead,

(9) today the captain is not drunk

conveys:

(9') today the captain is not drunk

Which is true, and:

(9") every other day the captain is drunk

Which is false. Note that (9') is the literal content of (9), while selecting (9") requires more inferential work, e.g. to assume the exceptive use of 'today', so applying the general principle that (for any value of P and x) if x is not P *today*, then it must be P every other day. Which is simply false, and has no close relation to the manifest meaning.
Evaluations might diverge, but it is not difficult to admit different degrees of responsibility, related to different degrees of inferential constraint: the logbook reader seems to be more responsible for deceit than Athanasius' persecutors; and correlatively, Athanasius is more responsible for deceit than the second officer. The constraint that leads George to infer 'this is blackmail' from Frieda's assertions, is different from the constraint that leads Brown, the logbook reader, Athanasius persecutors, Iggy, Othello and Frieda (in the killing peanuts case) to believe what they eventually believe.
To make this point clearer, consider that normally (see Webber's definition of M, quoted in § 2.2), the 'strong' aspects of an inference from what is said are held to be literality and logic: if you say that *p*, I am not in principle entitled to infer that you mean something different from *p*, unless the different content is logically implied by *p*. But

logic in itself does not have autonomous power on beliefs. An example mentioned by Smullyan (1992) regards a logical constraint that affects deceiving speakers and not their potential victims.

> VI – In the famous country of knights and knaves, knights always tell the truth and knaves always lie. If you want to know whether *p* (say: 'the king's castle lies to the North'), you ask any inhabitant: 'are you the kind of person who would say that *p*?'. Suppose the questioned person is a knight: if he says yes, you will know that '*p*' is true; if he says no, you know that it is false. If the questioned is a knave, you get the same result: if he says yes, you know that '*p*' is true; if he says no, you know it is false. So knaves are forced to give you the information you need.[29]

Combining Excluded Middle and background information you are in the condition of knowing something that has no relation to what knaves or knights say (and to what you ask). And knaves are *forced* to give you the information you need. Smullyan (1992 and 1994) speaks of «coercive logic» in this regard, but the scenario is not purely 'logical'.
Suppose that knaves discover your trap, so they understand that in lying about themselves they give you true information about what you really want to know. Suppose also that they still intend to deceive you (so they are not simply compulsive liars): in this case, they would tell you a true *de se* sentence, conveying false *de re* belief. They would say 'yes, I am that kind of person' if '*p*' is false, and 'no' if '*p*' is true. They would become misleaders, and now you will be 'forced' to believe that *p*, if '*p*' is false and not *p* if '*p*' is true. But suppose instead that before you had the opportunity of asking, you met someone who told you: 'pay attention, because in this country there are some misleading knaves'. Is he a knave or a knight? If you do not know, there is no inference: lacking of any directions, you would not have any method for knowing what you need to know. The subsistence of a logical constraint is submitted to the contextual combination of informative givens: and the force of logic (and other doxastic elements) varies accordingly.
What these examples show is that we appreciate the variety of cases, because (or to the extent that) we take into account the various factors interfering in rational inferences from what is said. The logical aspects of the inference variously interact with presuppositions and previous information of hearers concerning the content, the context, and the speaker. Some conveyed contents of an assertion seem more constraining on the hearer's beliefs than others. For instance, if Frieda is the character described in the blackmail paradox, then she ought not to be so confident that George's assertion means that the food is safe for her, and her eating George's fry without further investigation would be really inconsiderate.

4. The responsibility of mislead people

In virtue of what we have seen so far, an assertive situation is a case in which S says that *p* and wants the hearers (or addressees) H to believe that *q*, where *q* stands for one of the possible conveyances of what is said (including literal meaning). In other terms:

[29] Evidently, it is postulated that all inhabitants in the country know the king's castle location: so there cannot be the case of unfortunate knaves, who believe it is false what in fact is true. (The subsistence of this case would neutralize the trap).

S wants H to select a certain *q* within the range of possible conveyances of *p* and to accept it.

If *p* = *q*, then we have literal speakers, who do not expect any digressive interpretation of their saying. If *p* ≠ *q*, we may have a variety of non-literal speakers, among which misleaders, i.e. people who want H to select a certain false *q*.

Moving to what is actually conveyed by *p*, in case of *p* ≠ *q*, one may have that *p* entails *q*, or *q* is a completion or extension of *p*, or is presupposed or implied by *p*, or also: is given by contextual features that may make *p* true, or make S's intention understandable, or make H believe or disbelieve what S says (or all of this). The contextual possibilities are indeterminate, in number and properties. With the help of the usual lexicon, one may say that the range of *q* includes: explicitly asserted contents, entailments, implicatures, presuppositions, implicitures (completions – extensions, in Saul's terms). The contents of these kinds of conveyances may be postulated (by S), or effective: and the two sets differ, even if there could be intersections. Besides that, background beliefs (biases, prejudices, more or less forming a «common ground») positively provide presupposed contents variously interacting with possible inferred contents. They form what in the hermeneutical tradition has been called *pre-comprehension*[30], which may include beliefs about language (Brown thinks that a Ferrari is not a car but a kind of smartphone); about the topic (Brown does not know so much about luxury cars); about contextual ritualities or conventions (Brown does not believe that people in parties tell the truth); about the speaker (Brown considers Jones unreliable); about historical conditions (Brown's bank is going to go bankrupt).

There is no possibility of stating *ex ante* that, say, what is logically entailed is more rationally constraining than what is presupposed, or to asses that in any case, say, completions are more constraining on beliefs than extensions. But our (correct) judgement about victims' and deceivers' responsibility relies on a sort of 'calculus' that positively takes into account all the possibilities.

So stated, the implicit principles ruling our moral judgement when we evaluate deceptions accomplished by language can be summarized in terms of the following conventions.

> ***1*** *- Any uttered 'p' conveys some ps that are more or less related to the meaning of 'p', and may be or not rationally connected with 'p' in other ways; each of these conveyances may be true, or false, or untrue, and may exert a certain constraint on the hearer's beliefs, making her believe truth, or falsity.*

The conveyances of an uttered '*p*' are here expressed with an inference proximity number, from 0 to 1: given a certain assertion '*p',* we will have *p0*, *p0.1 ... p0.9, p1*. Hence, it is assumed that:

> ***2 -*** *Each conveyed p is intended to have an inferential index between 1 and 0 (included); different indices are meant to capture the different degrees of rational proximity of the inferred pn to p in the context, whereby degrees of proximity are minimally equivalent to the degrees of constraint exerted on the hearer's acceptance of one or another conveyance. In case of p0.9 the rational constraint is high, in p0.3 is low, and p1 expresses analyticity (entailment), or literality (or, in some cases, unquestionable completions or salient extensions), while p0 expresses no reasonable relation to p*[31].

[30] AA good introduction to this concept is given by Hoy (1992).

[31] In the system I'm adopting, there are degrees of inferential legitimacy corresponding to degrees of rationality: p ├ p1 is logical, and p ├ p0 is mere irrationality; while p ├ p0.8, p ├ p0.5, etc. express

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It should be stressed that *p0.9*, *p0.5*, etc., are intended to be *classes of doxastic force.* For instance, to mention the case suggested by Saul (II), '*p*' = 'Helga is not ready' is true, because Helga is not ready to believe that God exists, or to take part in the world athletic championship, but she is ready to see Iggy, or for the party. If Iggy infers that Helga is not ready to believe in God, or to take part in the world athletic championship, his inferred beliefs both belong, say, to the class *p0.1*, while 'Helga is not ready for the party' or 'she is not ready to see Iggy', are of the class *p0.9*.
In a first approximation, we may state the responsibility degrees in this way:

> ***3*** *- A deceived believer who has accepted an inferred conveyance whose doxastic proximity to what is said is low is more responsible for deceit than a believer whose selected conveyance is more connected to the intended meaning of the utterance (reasonable completions or extensions included). In case of inferences of the class p0.5, the responsibility of the deceived person is greater than in case of inference of the class p0.8.*

In practice, as suggested, Athanasius' persecutors are less responsible than the logbook reader: the inference from (8) to (8') was definitely of the class *p0.9*, while we can judge that the inference from (9) to (9') was of the class *p0.7*.
However, victim's responsibility is to be established in accordance with contextual conditions. Let's so assume acceptability *standard* AS, that states the acceptability of a certain *pn* of S's assertion '*p*' in a given context:

> ***4*** *- The conveyance pn of the assertion 'p' in a given context C is acceptable iff n is* $\geq AS$. *Also:* $A(pn \mid$ *'p' in C)* $\leftrightarrow n \geq AS$.

AS is meant to synthesize various contextual features, including hearers' mental conditions, background information, absolute or relative reliability of the speaker, special relation between speakers and hearers, etc. so it may vary in different situations, with reference to different subjects and agents.
All this given, we can consider the responsibility of speakers and hearers, admitting that:

> ***5*** *- When n satisfies AS, the speaker's responsibility (Rs) is 1 and victim's responsibility (Rv) in inferring pn is 0. When a hearer accepts some pn with* $n < AS$, *she is partially responsible for deceit.*

Yet, we cannot say that the victim is simply 'n-responsible' for accepting what she shouldn't accept, without indicating any comparative element. So it is rational to conclude that:

> ***6*** *- When a certain pn with* $n < AS$ *is selected, victim's responsibility is given by the difference between AS and n, so* $Rv = (AS - n)$. *Accordingly, the speaker's responsibility will be given by the complement of Rv, so* $Rs = (1 - Rv)$. *And the final Rv will be given by the difference between Rs and Rv.*

For instance we may suppose that (all things being equal) the inference 'the food is safe for me' from 'there are no peanuts' uttered by George, is of the kind *0.6*; this means that if Frieda accepts it without asking for specification, with AS = 0.8, she only diverges 0.2,

different rationality degrees. One may suppose that under 0.6 there is non-rational inference, but these are context-sensitive values. It should be reminded that these values do not express degrees of belief or certainty, but the degrees of epistemic coercion exerted by informational speech acts.

then she has a low responsibility in deceit, which is in no way equivalent to George's responsibility, as this will be 0.8. Contextual conditions may variously interfere in degree assignations, making some conveyances more binding,, independently from the proximity to literality, or deductive cogency or other potentiating factors. Suppose that Frieda does not imagine that George might want to kill her: the inference 'the food is safe' would belong to the class *p0.9* or *p0.8*. But the standard would be quite low. Suppose instead that she could guess George's criminal intention (because she's the character of *the blackmail paradox*): accepting *p* as intending 'the food is safe' would be inconsiderate, as said, so her inference would belong to the class *p0.2*.

Different conveyances, with different levels of proximity, may confirm each other, so there might be mutual reinforcement of inferential strength. It may happen that a certain *p* of the class *pn* is reasonably preferable, even if *n* is quite low, because there are other *ps* that are greater, or are similarly close to p, that confirm it. In St. Athanasius' case, as suggested, 'Athanasius is not far from here' conveys 'Athanasius is here' (true), with a quite low proximity, say 0.1, and 'Athanasius is not here' (false), that will have (for complementation) value 0.9. But the utterance also conveys the false self-ascription 'I am not Athanasius', whose value would be 0.9 or so, in virtue of the rule 'speakers do not refer to themselves in the third person'. So Athanasius' persecutors receive two false conveyances with value 0.9, and only one true, with value 0.1[32]. Their responsibility is null. Not only that: we see that in Athanasius' utterance falsity exerts a high degree of coercion on the hearer's beliefs, so his deceit is not properly 'by misleading', but is rather close to that sort of L by completion exemplified by 'Helga is not ready'. Note also that to fix AS, a basic reliability of the speaker should be presupposed; but the speaker may *act* on her own reliability, deceptively increasing it, in various ways. This is typically Iago's case, as his deceit relies on pretending to be a loyal friend of Othello, so most of the possible implicatures of what he says are supposed to be true and/or believed true by Othello. When deceit is accompanied or prepared by deceiving moves concerning the speaker's reliability, the deceiver's responsibility may deserve value 1 even if the proximity level of the inferred *p* is not so high.

These are only some of the possible contextual features that may be mentioned. They do not really modify the basic principles of the calculus. Suppose that the reasonable value of the implicature 'the food is safe for me' from 'there are no peanuts' uttered by George is of the kind 0.7. If Frieda is unaware of George's criminal intention, her responsibility in not asking for specification (do you mean the food is safe?) is to be established on the basis of the fact that Frieda's unawareness makes the standard quite low, say 0.8. As suggested, if really George hadn't known anything about Frieda's allergy, in normal condition (without criminal intent) he would have add something like 'why are you asking me this?'. But he did not, and this is an attenuating factor for Frieda's responsibility. The fact that George would have said this is not strictly implied by the context, so the contextual conveyance 'George knows that Frieda suffers from peanut allergy' is of the class 0.6 or so. Now the failed question, joined to Frieda's ignoring George's murderous intent, acts as a strengthening factor for Frieda's inferring 'the food is safe'. We have thus two conveyances confirming that the food is safe; one of the class 0.6 and the other of the class 0.7. Choosing the value that is more favourable for George, we would have Rv* = (0.8 – 0.6) = 0.2, and so George's responsibility will be 0.8. Given the seriousness of the harm produced, we decide that Frieda's responsibility is irrelevant, and whoever mentions it, is simply combining unfairness with falsity.

[32] In probability calculus, a conjunction does not strengthen, but weakens truth. But values 1, 0.9, etc. here do not express probability, rather the rational proximity to what is said.

5. Conclusions

Largely 'quantifying' approaches to concepts[33] do not provide exact results. They simply help to make what we generally do with language clearer, from a logical and epistemological perspective. In this sense, the idea of a 'responsibility calculus' has basically two aims. First it wants to illustrate the way in which we adapt our judgements about the deceiving effects of language to the variety of cases. Some inferences from what is asserted seem more rational than others, the epistemic docility of a hearer may be judged more or less justified, and we generally are in the condition of stating the import of speakers' and hearers' responsibility in making believe and believing, respectively. What we need is to be aware of the principles that rule our usual strategy. A second intended aim of the inquiry is to show that on the basis of this calculus we can see the unfairness of arguments that emphasize victims' responsibility in case of deceit. And we can do this by relating unfairness to falsity. If we want to confirm the idea that VB arguments are fallacious, the calculus shows that this is because, in most cases, they are unsound, the premises are false[34].

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[33] For conceptual engineering as «metrological analysis»: Scharp, 2013. See also the «epistemetric» analysis proposed by Rescher (2006).

[34] A different version of this article has been published in Italian, in Rivista di Filosofia: vol. CVII, 2016, pp. 193-217.

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